

# “Choices”

## *Valley Presbyterian Church – August 2, 2020*

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost      Rev. John Wahl      Ruth 1:11-18, 4:9-17

Today, we return to the book of Ruth – the story of this Moabite woman who returns with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, to the city of Bethlehem following the tragic deaths of their husbands. In our first reading, we hear this beautiful expression of Ruth’s commitment to Naomi and her God; one that is sometimes read in wedding ceremonies to mark the couple’s formation of a new family. In the Jewish faith, Ruth is considered to be the model convert to faith; for even though she is given three opportunities to stay with her own people, Ruth commits to go with her mother-in-law and assimilate to a new religion and land.

This vow of commitment sets in motion a series of events that leads Ruth to marry Boaz, who is a relative of Naomi’s deceased husband, Elimelech. Because of this familial relationship, Boaz – according to Jewish law – is able to redeem the property that belonged to Naomi and, through the child he and Ruth have together, restore the family line of Elimelech.

These three people – Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz – make commitments to one another that cross over traditional ethnic and religious bounds; commitments in which each person seeks the prosperity of the other – and the family they form – rather than focusing on themselves. Their example invites us to remember the kinds of selfless commitments we make and we keep; to whoever we choose and consider to be a part of our own family.<sup>1</sup>

And – as we discover at the close of today’s reading – their commitments to each other place them in a position within the descendants of King David. Ruth’s son, Obed, is the father of Jesse who is the father of David. This immigrant from Moab is the great-grandmother of Israel’s most beloved leader; and thus, according to the gospel lineage, a descendant of Jesus.

Boaz announces his commitment to Naomi and Ruth before the gathered townspeople and elders, who serve as witnesses to the redemption of the land and family line. They offer a blessing over Ruth, praying for her fertility; even invoking the names of Rachel and Leah, two of the wives of Jacob and foremothers of the nation of Israel. And when Ruth gives birth to Obed, her son, the women of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*

the town gather to celebrate with her. They affirm Ruth's value, saying to Naomi that Ruth is better even than seven sons. Ruth's commitment to her mother-in-law has literally saved both of their lives; and has rescued the family line of Elimelech from extinction.

Throughout this story, we see Ruth staying true to her commitment to her mother-in-law and to her new faith. We hear no sign of regret over leaving behind her previous identity. And yet, it is impossible to believe that Ruth had totally forgotten. As much as she may have wanted to – and needed to – fit into her new society and religion; as much as she acted the part of the model immigrant: by being loyal, hard-working, and deferential; she was still a Moabite. Her value to her new community – the townspeople of Bethlehem – is measured by her ability to “build up” her husband's house, to provide a child to continue to the family line.

While this can be attributed in-part to the patriarchal system of the time, it also should remind us that no-one – whether man or woman, native or immigrant – should be valued solely for their usefulness; for what they can offer. People have value in and of themselves, no matter their gender or where they have come from. All of us have been created in the image of God and are deserving of the blessing of others.

Immigrants, especially, are prone to be held to this standard of utility. Ruth is presented here as a model immigrant based on her ability to assimilate: to leave her home, her faith, and her identity behind; but that can sometimes be an unfair or even damaging expectation. Aside from the child that she bears, she also shares the gifts of commitment and love; things that are not so easily measured. Like so many other immigrants today and throughout history, Ruth's example is one of perseverance; and is to be celebrated.

And yet, it is important to interpret the Bible and its stories alongside people with different experiences than our own. We can help each other see things – both in the texts and in ourselves – that we might otherwise miss. With regards to the book of Ruth, for those of us who only have the experience of belonging to the dominant culture, this means paying attention to the experiences and interpretation of minority voices.

In contrast to her sister-in-law, Orpah, Ruth chooses to go with Naomi to Israel, and to be absorbed completely into a new culture at the expense of her own heritage. There seems to be no choice for a middle ground; no place for someone who wants to dwell in Israel while retaining a connection to her own people and culture. That same choice is sometimes echoed in our own day when minorities in

our midst are accepted only when they “act like Americans” while those who hold onto their cultural heritage might be told to go back to where they came from.

Sometimes, the resistance that immigrants and minorities face is less obvious. Even the seemingly innocent question, “where are you from?” might reinforce the perception of being what Gale Lee, a third-generation American of Chinese descent, calls a “perpetual foreigner.”<sup>2</sup> Ruth, despite having left her own people to swear loyalty to her new land, is still referred to as “the Moabite.” Her ethnicity serves as a marker of her identity as an outsider.

The book of Ruth allows us to reflect on a story from a different era about immigrants and their place in society; how they are and always have been an integral part of our story and how assimilation need not be the ultimate goal. It also allows us to reflect on the different ways that our commitments are chosen and constructed. Increasingly, our families are blended and made more complex by living far apart and living busy lives. This stresses our commitments and makes us choose over and over again how we will place the interests of one another above those of our own.

Ruth – the model convert in Judaism and the model immigrant who reminds us what it means to be a stranger in a foreign land – also offers us a model of loving commitment. She is the glue that re-attaches and holds together a family, one that will one day bear the greatest of all the Israelites, David; and will stretch to include Jesus, our brother and savior. She is therefore our ancestor as well; and a model for the ways that we can love and accept one another, including those who – like Jesus himself – are rejected by the world.

As we come to the table today, using the gifts of this earth to remember Jesus’ gift of himself, let us remember that we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, to give of what we have received for the sake of others, and to commit ourselves to familial bonds in the same way that Ruth – by giving of herself fully – loved others. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Robert Williamson, Jr. in *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*